

HISTORY IN A BACK YARD



OUR BACK YARD

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Hope for a summer in Europe vanished into the dim background of "next year" while discouragement occupied the foreground. Where forsooth could one get new ideas except in Europe, where find a library outside of London or Paris, where study historical records but in foreign archives, where see the results of archæological discoveries outside of European museums, where harvest stores of historical knowledge except in foreign fields? Winter quarters for nine months at home were endurable for the sake of three months of activity in other lands, but hibernation prolonged to twenty-one months,—that was unthinkable. The calendar has indeed always seemed hopelessly wrong,—were not the three months in Europe a full year of mental life, and did not the nine months of constant draft on mental resources at home shrink to a paltry week of growth? Did not three months of acquisition in Europe leave one rich, while nine months of constant depletion of mental capital at home left one bankrupt? If "fifty years of Europe were better than a cycle of Cathay," did it not follow that one-fourth of a year in Europe was better than three-fourths of a year anywhere else? It was all a tangle that might possibly have been straightened out after a summer abroad, but in June it was a hopeless snarl.

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But the chance question of a friend put Aladdin's lamp in our hands and opened up before our eyes as large an undiscovered world as could be found in seven kingdoms. She had asked how she could study history in a back yard, and, lo, the whole past opened up at our door! Why search for hid treasure abroad when the history of the world was spread out in the back yard? Perish the thought that we had ever sought knowledge elsewhere,—we would study historical records in a garden seat, and search for archæological remains in the summer house. If Mahomet could not go to the mountain, the mountain could summer in the back yard. The world was still ours to explore!

Our back yard is a parallelogram about thirty feet wide and four times as long. On one of the long sides a board fence separates it from the adjoining property and in that direction a series of fences marks the divisions of private property. On the other side of our yard, our kindly landlord and a genial neighbor agreed to take down the division fence between the two places, other neighbors on that side have followed their example, and thus a green park extends in the rear of the block half way to the corner. At the lower end of the yard, a very high board fence separates our yard from the one that joins it back-to-back and conceals from our view the vegetable garden of the neighbor in our rear.

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Now it seems a very simple, commonplace thing to have a fence, or not to have a fence, and the question is apparently one to be decided by the common consent of the two adjacent property holders. If a fence is built, it means presumably that the property owners place a high value on privacy and seclusion, that they do not care for the unsought visits of children, that they do not wish to expose their flowers, their fruit, and their vegetables to the ravages of those too lazy to plant their own gardens, but not too lazy to profit by the industry of others, that they seek protection from the dogs, pigs, goats, and cows that in some localities still have the freedom of the town and in a not remote past had it in all. If the fence is surmounted by a row of spikes, it indicates not simply an aversion to certain undesirable conditions, but a positive fear of disagreeable visitors and of dangerous intruders, coupled with serious doubts about the enforcement of the law on the part of those charged with that duty. If a high hedge is selected to mark the boundary lines, it suggests not only a love of retirement and contemplation, but a desire for protection from dust while currents of air are not entirely shut off. The hedge also becomes a screen that separates the prosaic vegetable garden from the lawn or the flower beds. If, however, the hedge is placed behind a high stone wall, then indeed are all passers-by impressed with the love of solitude that characterizes the occupants of

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the place. The invitation "to loaf and invite the soul" becomes esoteric not exoteric, and whoever braves the forbidding wall and hedge and enters within, feels himself a candidate for the medal awarded the doer of "the bravest deed ever done."

If, on the other hand, no fence is built, or one already built is taken down, it may indicate a disregard of privacy and a desire to live more or less in the public eye, it may be an index of æsthetic ideals, or it may imply a growing desire to subordinate personal advantage to public good, or an appreciation of how much is gained by neighbors who have interests in common rather than mutually repellant characteristics. The absence of a fence shows that laws are both made and enforced restraining cattle from running at large,—what community of interest once demanded, community of interest now forbids.

It is thus apparently a matter of option between neighbors whether or not property rights are indicated by an outward, visible symbol, and it seems equally a matter of option whether that symbol of private ownership shall take the form of a fence, a hedge, or a wall, or any combination of these three forms of enclosure. Moreover, it seems again a matter of option what variety of material is to be used in constructing the division-marker. The wall may be of brick because brick is cheap, or because it harmonizes with the architecture of the house and with its other settings;

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it may be of stone because the land needed clearing, or because the owner was able to gratify his taste and import stone from a distance. The material of which the dividing wall is built may indicate either one of the two extremes of necessity or of luxury, of resourcefulness of ideas or of abundance of means.

The fence in its turn may be a record of pioneer days when the first settlers cleared the forests and the stump fence became a by-product; the zig-zag rail fence is a later development of pioneer life, while the plain board fence and the picket fence were the plebeian and the patrician divisions between village lots. The lattice fence meant honeysuckle vines, while the iron fence meant the portly, prosperous merchant who was always up-to-date. The introduction of the barbed wire fence indicated the ravages that had been made on the timber supply of the country, while legislation against the use of barbed wire and the substitution for it of woven wire and other forms of wire fencing is a record of growing humanitarianism and the care that the state is coming to take for the protection of both animals and men. The still further depletion of the timber supply is recorded in the displacement of the wooden fence post by the concrete post, and thus the gamut is complete from a fence entirely of timber in some stage of development to a fence constructed without any timber whatsoever.

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The character of the hedge as marking the division line is determined by its secondary object. Is this secondary object protection against the free passage of animals, the osage orange is called into requisition; is the land low and marshy and does it demand support, the willow hedge is set out; if wind and dust are special enemies, the hedge of evergreens results; if privacy is sought, the privet, the box, and the arbor vitæ are in demand; if varied beauty is the ideal, the barberry is planted. The hedge, to a greater extent than the wall and the fence, not only serves as a line of demarcation, but it also renders a secondary service of beauty scarcely less important than its primary one of indicating boundary lines.

But, after all, wall and fence and hedge are but outward symbols of a crude method of marking private ownership. "The things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are unseen are eternal." The real boundary lines have been long ago established by the theodolite of the surveyor and they have been recorded in the office of the county clerk in the county court house. Walls, fences, and hedges of every form and variety known to man may be set up, and taken down, but the surveyor's instruments and the recorded deeds are a court from whose decisions no appeal can be taken.

The unpretentious plain board fence that separates us from one of our neighbors has intro-

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duced us to the whole question of methods of marking boundary lines, to the complicated subject of surveying that has in the beginning determined where these boundary lines are to run, and to an elaborate legal system that has been developed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining the claims of rightful ownership.

On the other side of our back yard, there is no indication of private ownership of property,—neither wall, nor fence, nor hedge separates us from our neighbor's apple-trees and rhubarb, we share his garden seats and his lawn swing, and we in turn offer him the hospitality of our berry bushes, our grape vines, and our summer house. We know indeed that the boundary line has been measured to the fraction of an inch and that its location has been duly described in the deeds of ownership of the two adjacent properties, and that these deeds are presumably deposited in two respective safe deposit boxes in one of the city banks. But as long as no fence obtrudes itself with its insistence on private ownership, we shall enjoy the fiction of joint ownership with our neighbor of all the treasures of two back yards. The fence means isolation, separation, and lack of common interest; the absence of the fence means community life, mutual aid, toleration, and joint pleasures and opportunities.

Who made the first fence and who gave him the right to make that fence? "Ah there's the rub!" If the fence on one side of our back yard has in-

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roduced us to the realms of higher mathematics by way of the surveyor's line and compass, and to the Torrens system of recording deeds by way of the courthouse on the corner, and to the question of public guardianship of personal property by way of the safe deposit box in the bank, the absence of a fence on the other side has brought us face to face with a question that antedates all the written records of history. Did private ownership of land precede communal ownership, or was land held in common and did enclosure follow? Over this question battles on paper have been lost and won, reputations made and shattered, and the final word in regard to it said with each and every recurring discussion of the subject. With a fence on two sides and no fence on the other two sides, our back yard maintains a discreet impartiality and refuses to commit itself on the merits of the controversy.

Our back yard has nothing that even by courtesy could be called a garden,—a few spring bulbs blossom in the lawn, a row of rosebushes remind us when June comes, bunches of old-fashioned artemisias announce the arrival of autumn, a trumpet vine all but conceals a rustic summer house, honeysuckles cover the lower branches of a mulberry tree, berry bushes and morning glories conceal in summer the long dividing fence, a high trellis for grape vines is at the lower end of the yard, immediately in front of the high division fence covered with woodbine. A long narrow

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strip of lawn connects the back yard proper with a passage-way that leads to a bit of lawn in front of the house where a rose of Sharon and an hydrangea are found and a wistaria that climbs over the front porch. A few spring flowering shrubs are planted along this very narrow strip of grass that connects the back yard with the passage-way, and a few annuals blossom for us wherever it is convenient to drop the seed in the spring. An occasional weed persistently comes up every year, apparently rather not to be forgotten than to be obnoxiously obtrusive.

It all seems very simple and commonplace and there is nothing that at first indicates its cosmopolitan character. But a study of genealogy reveals many surprising and interesting family relationships. The crocus comes from the Levant, the hyacinth and the narcissus bear Greek names, the daffodil is a native of England, the tulip in its name is allied with Turkey and in its history with Holland, the fleur-de-lis is the insignia of France and also of Florence, our lilac is Persian, the wistaria is Japanese, the asters Chinese, the rose of Sharon suggests Palestine, the ubiquitous thistle is Scotch, while cosmos in its name connects us with the order and harmony of the whole created universe. Could the nations of the world live together as peacefully as do their representatives in our back yard, international peace would be already an accomplished fact.

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But our flowers and shrubs and vines bring us into contact not only with the nations of the world in this very concrete form, but they introduce us to the world-old union and conflict of realism and idealism, the literal and the imaginative. Realism confronts us in the names of the morning glory, the trumpet vine, the honeysuckle, and the tulip, while imagination and idealism give us the heliotrope, the hydrangea, the narcissus, and the hyacinth. Yet it is the realism of the Greek that crops out in the names of the heliotrope and the hydrangea while it undergoes a sea-change in becoming for us words of the imagination and idealism. Is it possible that the realism of one becomes the idealism of another? What if all our realism has its imaginative side and what if our idealism has its roots in realism?

We have never quite understood why there should be a mulberry tree in our back yard, but there it is and it makes a pleasant connection for us with that doughty Dutch patroon, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer. He never saw the vast estates on the Hudson to which his name was given, but he managed the territory and the colony in his Amsterdam office at a distance of more than three thousand miles in space and four months' distance in time. Among other minute instructions sent out to his agent is one to the effect that he should be on the look-out for silkworms since they are likely to be found where there are mulberry trees. Whether the agent found the silkworms or not,

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the papers of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer do not state, but we infer that he may not have done so since we have been on the look-out for silkworms for some years, and while in our search we have encountered fireflies, mosquitoes, June bugs, and bats, no silkworms have been discovered.

Our back yard does not in truth have a Lombardy poplar, but it so naturally belongs there that we often look at a certain spot and lo, the tree is there. The Lombardy poplar was the emblem of democracy in the struggle between Lombardy and Austria and the very derivation of its name from *populus* gives it a democratic lineage. If princes and potentates take the rose and the lily as emblems of their authority, why should not humble social democrats take the Lombardy poplar with its double democratic lineage as the badge of their individual beliefs? And if the tree is not in reality in our back yard, but is there in spirit, is it not in the end the same?

Nor does our back yard number among its assets a Norway maple. Yet we have claimed kinship also with this. If at times we are all cowards, are there not other times when the blood of the vikings flows in our veins? If at times inertia keeps us in our accustomed places, are there not many more times when the zest for exploring the undiscovered realms of knowledge takes us into far countries? Our Norway maple links us with the venturesome voyagers of old who were ever seeking new paths across the track-

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less seas and it thus opens up to us the whole world of knowledge for discovery and exploration. The cherry-tree outside of our back window is not ours,—the robins take the fruit, other birds build their nests in its branches, winter claims its foliage, and we have no special feeling of affection for it; it is a plain, prosaic cherry-tree, doubtless with admirable qualities, but it is a stranger to us. But our blood tingles with the glimpse of our democratic Lombardy poplar and our venturesome Norway maple. These bloom for us in perennial youth.

The grapevines at the lower end of the yard are not in themselves real additions to the place,—the grapes rarely ripen, and when they do ripen they are small and tasteless. It is not for the sake of what they are, but for the sake of what they suggest, that every year we mend the trellis and trim the vines,—for the grapevines connect us with the great revolutionary movement in western Europe and put us in touch with the company of young men who came to this country to seek the political liberty they had missed in their native land. Among the number was a young German who settled in northern Iowa, edited a newspaper for a livelihood, and cultivated grapes for recreation. Coming from the valley of the Rhine where the vines were grown on poles rather than on trellises, he became an ardent advocate of the advantages of the single-pole method of grapevine culture, and the merits of his grapes

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attested individually the virtues of his theory. But his theory of grape cultivation and the zest with which he advocated it were after all but an outlet for a genuine love of political liberty and social individualism,—traits that characterized his family, another branch of which had given to the cause of liberty the Tyrolese patriot, Andreas Hofer. If we tend our grapevines and do not resent their thankless return for the care lavished on them, it is because we see behind them the German Revolution of 1848-1849 and back of that the Tyrolese uprising of 1809, and because our sympathies and interests are with the side that met temporary defeat in the struggle for political equality.

The English ivy does not thrive in our climate, but it sometimes maintains a precarious existence where it does not grow luxuriantly, and our back yard counts as its greatest treasure a modest vine grown from a slip taken from the home of Maria Mitchell at Nantucket. When discouragement comes and nothing seems quite worth while, the ivy becomes a veritable tent of *Pari-Banou* and quickly we are at her island home, we discover with her the famous comet that bears her name, we share her interests and her work, we sit in her observatory and listen to "the music of the spheres," and behold, all things are made new.

Our back yard has little in the way of furniture, but that little is an interesting record of the changes that have come even in our own day in

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the direction of greater naturalness and a more normal, healthy, wholesome life. The old love of fashionable adornment that found expression in iron dogs, stone deer, and garden statuary, and the love of ostentatious display that found an outlet in the importation of Italian seats, French fountains and Spanish vases have given place to a genuine interest in out-of-door life, healthful exercise, and rational recreation. The old play house where the children quietly amused themselves with toys and dolls has given place to the sand box, the tent, the cart, and the wheel, and the diminutive automobile. Tennis and croquet are possible even in a restricted space, and the bicycle is again coming into its own. The hammock, the garden bench, the seat with protecting awning, and the summer house all show the growing love of fresh air, and the appreciation of the back yard as a place for rest and refreshment. The change has extended even to animal life,—the artificial bird house has disappeared and the birds seek their own location, while the dog kennel has vanished with the banishment of the large dog to the country.

Industrial changes are recorded in our back yard. Once the weekly laundry was displayed on lines strung between posts, then came the clothes reel, and now both have disappeared since the laundry is done out of the house. But our back yard joins back-to-back the yards of the two-family houses on the next street, and now we see,

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is it every day in the week? the line and pulley that show that the domestic "wash" is done in the limited space afforded by flat and tenement and apartment. Is there some mal-adjustment somewhere that demands that laundry work must be done in a space inadequate for it, while it is sent out of a house that has abundance of room for doing it? Will sometime the record show that laundry work is everywhere taken out of the individual flat, tenement, apartment, house, mansion, palace, and done under perfect sanitary and economic conditions?

Electric wires running in our back window show the cooling of the kitchen by an electric fan and suggest the future possibilities of the substitution of electricity for gas in lighting and in summer cooking.

The growing interest in sanitation has also left its record in our back yard. A disused cistern means an improved municipal water supply and the galvanized iron can with tight fitting cover indicates that garbage is collected by the city, though the pile of ashes in the back yard of one neighbor and the mound of rubbish in that of another suggest fields for municipal activity as yet but partially entered. The rain-water barrel in the back yard of a friend, with its coat of kerosene, suggests new ideas of sanitation and the mosquito.

Our back yard has a modest outlook over the back yards of our neighbors and in one we see

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the unused conservatory of a fine old place,—unused, not because the flowers are loved less than formerly, but rather perhaps because they are more universally loved. The greenhouses of the florist have superseded the conservatory of the private owner, outside of large country estates, and former luxuries have become democratic necessities. The back yard of another neighbor has a bed of herbs, apparently containing every variety known to the botanist,—a luxury to-day, but an interesting record of past time when every housewife of necessity grew her own herbs for savory flavorings and for the family medicine closet. The spring flowers and early vegetables of another back yard suggest the annual flitting of our neighbor and the summer flowers and late vegetables that await them at their country home. The orderly tool house of still another neighbor, with its lawn mower and roller, its variety of garden tools, and its hose reel all indicate the growing attention paid to the care of lawns, gardens, and yards, though the opposite tendency is indicated in the case of a neighbor who thinks that his proximity to a park frees him from the necessity of troubling about a back yard at all.

Our back yard has never had a barn or a stable, but as we look up and down the yards on the block we see recorded the passing of the stable and the coming of the garage, and not only the simple garage for the automobile, but the more elaborate one with “two rooms and a bath” for the chauffeur

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records the ever-ascending standard of living for employees as well as for employer. Not far away a single old-fashioned barn remains with its record of a cow as well as of a horse once kept, and with its chicken coop attached. If the family horse and carriage has become an automobile, if the family cow has been removed to the dairy farm, and the family chickens now lay their eggs on a poultry farm, will not the family washtub in time develop into the country laundry?

So our back yard has the records of all the ages within its narrow enclosure. Prehistoric questions of the ownership of land lie in our fences, classical mythology blossoms in our bulbs, the discovery of a new world rises in our Norway maple, affection for mother country blooms in daffodil and thistle, the Dutch West India Company lives in our mulberry tree, new trade routes are opened up in our lilies, commercial treaties are signed in our shrubs, Italian independence shimmers in our Lombardy poplar, political liberty and the downfall of tyrants climb over our grape trellis, and international peace is proclaimed in all that grows within our domain.

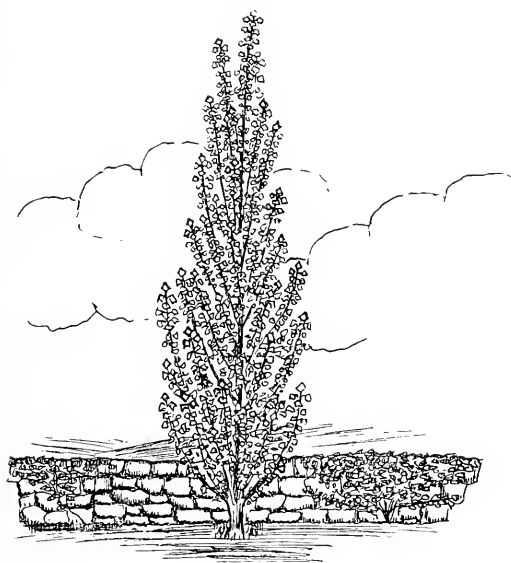
Sanitation is recorded in our garbage can, municipal improvement in our disused cistern, higher standards of living in the garage, education in the sand box, wholesome recreation in the tennis court, love of fresh air in the garden seat, summer migration in the abandoned garden, housing problems in laundry line and pulley, and

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progress in invention in electric wires. Genealogy is concealed in our flowers and biography in our vines; democracy lives in our trees and patriotism thrives in our weeds; economic theory lifts up its head in the single tax on land and economic research delves into enclosures, while over all broods the spirit of historical investigation.

What are the treasures of Europe in comparison with the wealth of the whole world that is ours by the right of eminent domain when claimed from the back steps?

The advantages of studying history in a back yard are manifold. Neither hot sun, nor pouring rain, nor driving winds interfere with the pursuit of knowledge on a back porch. No impertinent guides must be placated with fees, no taxicabs deplete our pocketbooks, no Baedeker proclaims us tourists, no foreigners practice their English on us, no one jeers at our efforts to speak an unknown tongue, no one gives us the wrong change or obsolete coins, rooms and meals are "just as good as they are at home." If work presses, or the bank fails, or a sprained ankle comes, or unexpected demands on time arise,—seek the records of history in the back yard.





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